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ABSTRACT

This technical assistance paper provides preschool planners and staff with information on developmental characteristics of preschool children relevant to planning and providing a quality preschool program. Following a case scenario underscoring the need for understanding child development, a theoretical framework concerning child development is presented. The framework includes summaries of the work of theorists and provides explanations about significant aspects of social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Significant developmental principles are discussed, and the normative development characteristics for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children are presented in the form of charts. The paper also examines the importance of understanding individual differences, and the teacher's responsibilities toward each child. Concluding comments are on the valuable role of play, and the influences of family, culture, and community on the development of the child. Contains 18 references. (BAC)

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KENTUCKY PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

Overview Of Child Development

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Case Scenario

Recently, Ms. Cunningham was employed to plan, organize, and implement an educational program for four year olds in a public school system. She had taught kindergarten children in another school district and nursery school for three year olds in a church setting.

As Ms. Cunningham begins to assess the qualifications, knowledge, skills, and experience she brings to this situation, she considers questions related to early childhood development:

- *How do young children grow and learn?*
- *How are four's similar to three's and five's?*
- *Do four's exhibit characteristics unique to that age-level?*
- *What types of special needs services will exist for children, families, and community?*

Professionally, Ms. Cunningham views teaching as a significant way to make a positive impact on children and families. She is mindful that the early childhood teacher is an influential model as she initiates the formation of a trusting relationship with children and families, demonstrates respectful guidance of young children and implements appropriate learning experiences for all children within the school setting.

Ultimately, Ms. Cunningham recognizes the need for a solid foundation in child development. She knows that a workable knowledge of child development is the essential requirement for accomplishing the task at hand.

Each child follows his or her own growth pattern, in both rate of development and eventual size.

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Child Development: Theoretical Framwork

How do young children grow and learn?

The field of child development offers an array of explanations regarding the growth and development of young children. This variety of explanations or theories exists because children's behavior, individually and collectively, is too intricate and multi-dimensional for any single theory to define adequately all of its components and dynamic interactions. According to Berk (1991), multiple theories serve as organizing frameworks for observing children and provide a systematic rational basis for practical action. Theories indicate which aspects of children's behaviors are significant to observe at any one moment. They emphasize why children's behaviors are important to wholesome development, individual transactions, group dynamics, program planning and guidance.

Therefore, as a professional it is necessary to become familiar with theories examining the dimensions of the whole child—Social, Emotional, Physical, and Cognitive. The following summaries of relevant theorists provide explanations about significant aspects of development within each dimension.

Major Theorists

- **Psychosocial** — Erik Erikson defines eight stages associated with psychosocial development. Three of the eight stages are applicable to development in the early childhood period. Development at each stage occurs in relation to the child's individual life situation and cultural background. Quality of interaction at each stage results in positive or negative psychological attributes. Defined tasks form a foundation; that foundation supports other positive aspects of behavior. Also, development is a resilient process in which crisis or challenging situations presented are opportunities for learning and growing.

  1. TRUST versus MISTRUST (Birth-1), infants gain a sense of trust from interactions with primary caregivers in such a way that confidence is established as infants' needs are met in a predictable, pleasurable, and sensitive manner.
  2. AUTONOMY versus SHAME and DOUBT (1-3 years), children develop a sense of self, an identity separate from their parents or primary caregivers. They develop a sense of power as they become more mobile and exercise their emerging language skills. Children like to make decisions appropriate to skill and age-level. Adults acknowledge sense of independence and encourage safe exploration of the environment.
  3. INITIATIVE versus GUILT (3-6 years), children engage in dramatic play to re-invent or re-create situations they experience. They enjoy assuming responsibilities for purposeful activities. Adults need to provide opportunities for dramatic play, projects, and decision-making opportunities. They need to validate children's thinking skills and positive strides toward independence. (Anselmo, 1987; Berk, 1991; Clarke & Dawson, 1989).

- **Cognitive Development** — Piaget's theory of cognition outlines four stages of development; two of the four stages provide relevant concepts and explanations for understanding how young children process information; how they think during the early years.

  1. Sensorimotor (0-2 years) - infants use their senses and motor abilities to learn about their environment of place, people, events, and objects. They develop the concept of permanency related to objects.
  2. Preoperational (2-7 years) - children acquire the ability to use mental images to represent people, objects, and events. They demonstrate egocentric thought, interpreting environment and interactions from a single point of view. Their ability to reason in a logical manner is affected by perception; they focus on one characteristic or aspect of an activity at any one time. Children thrive on sensory motor experience, utilize concrete materials and real objects; they are active participants in their environments. Children use mental pictures and word labels to represent their thought processes. They use repetition to integrate experiences and actions (Berk, 1991; Piaget, 1952; Santrock & Yussen, 1988).

- **Maturationist** — Arnold Gesell and colleagues, Ames and Ilg, emphasize the role of genetics and biological timing in development. They indicate that growth patterns and specific skills "unfold" or emerge at predetermined rates. Gesell and his associates define normative ages at which children exhibit physical, cognitive, social, and other behavioral skills. They contend that maturation is an important concept to be considered in early childhood development (Ames & Ilg, 1976; Anselmo, 1987; and Berk, 1991).

- **Behavioral and Social Learning Theory** — B. F. Skinner, Albert Bandura, and Walter Mischel are proponents of the theory emphasizing the role learning plays in development. They view development as a continuous but gradual, cumulative process. They suggest motivating children's learning with reinforcement, tangible and intangible, shaping behavior with the completion of small steps that lead to the acquisition of a "whole" task or skill, and using modeling and imitation to facilitate social development (Anselmo, 1987; Berk, 1991; Santrock & Yussen, 1988).

- **Ecology of Human Development** — Roger Barker and Urie Brofenbrenner advocate the study of children in their natural environments. Brofenbrenner visualizes the environment as a series of concentric systems that extend beyond the home, school, and neighborhood settings. He defines four systems that reflect a powerful impact on children's development:

  1. Microsystem - inner-most system including child's family, school, peers, and neighborhood; refers to the activities, roles, and relationships in the child's immediate surroundings. Brofenbrenner emphasizes the effects adults have on children's behavior as well as the effects children have on adult interactions.
  2. Mesosystem - emphasizes the relationships among microsystems, such as home, school, neighborhood and child care facilities.
  3. Exosystem - includes social situations that affect children's experi-

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Planning activities that match the developmental level of the children helps children experience a sense of accomplishment when they are able to complete an activity.

ences in the immediate environment. The parent's work place, community affiliations, and social networks are examples of that system.

4. Macrosystem - outer-most system, refers to the attitudes, ideologies, values, laws, regulations, and customs of a particular culture. A critical point in this system is the priority given to children's developmental needs and the experiences children have within the lower level of environmental systems. (Berk, 1991, Santrock & Yussen, 1988).

Brofenbrenner views the environment as a "dynamic, ever-changing force" in children's development (Berk, 1991, p. 19).

Developmental Principles

Significant principles of development arise from theoretical frameworks and research. The following statements are derived from studies and information reported in the former overview of theories.

- Development in the early years is significant to attaining potential future development.
- Development is affected by maturation and learning.
- Development is predictable; emergence of skills occurs in a sequence. However, tempo or rate at which skills develop may vary.
- Development is directional. According to Gesell, development proceeds from head-to-toe (cephalocaudal) and from the center part of body to the outer parts (proximodistal).
- Development is interrelated; for example the refinement of visual skills and change in the shape of the eyeball affect the development of fine motor skills as well as attention to detail.
- Development is qualitative as well as quantitative. As the number of skills and patterns of behavior develop, the quality of skill becomes more refined.
- Development is influenced by opportunities to exercise skills or patterns of behavior through repetition.
- Development is continuous; may be exhibited in growth spurts and may be affected by external or internal changes.
- Development occurs in stages characterized by themes and patterns of behavior (Helms & Turner, 1978; Peterson, 1987; Santrock & Yussen, 1988).

As a teacher of young children it is helpful to be familiar with the sequences and characteristics of age appropriate behaviors. Knowledge about the approximate age at which various skills and behaviors are exhibited assists the teacher in formulating realistic expectations for children as individual participants in a group situation. This information aids the teacher in planning the environment and organizing concrete materials for learning experiences. Furthermore, it sets the stage for the assessment process of observing, documenting, and reporting the growth of children. This knowledge serves as a baseline for making adjustments to individual needs.

Developmental Milestones

It is very important to distinguish chronological age from developmental age. Chronological age defines the number of years a child has existed since birth. On the other hand, developmental age portrays the age levels at which a child actually functions given various categories of behaviors and skills. In other words, a child who is chronologically four years of age may exhibit gross motor skills characteristic of a five year old and expressive language skills within the age range of a three year old.

Age level characteristics are useful gauges. They define examples of normative behaviors relevant to chronological age. They establish guidelines by which teachers plan for participants as well as assess their growth and development. The following charts provide examples of normative behaviors for three, four, and five year old children.

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DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS*
of
THREE YEAR OLD CHILDREN

DEVELOPMENTAL AREAS	CHARACTERISTICS OR MILESTONES
PHYSICAL	Nutrition and growth patterns: Appetites are good at three. Prime time to introduce new foods and increase food selection patterns. Some children may be sensitive to textures of foods. Growth spurt may be experienced during the latter half of 3 year old period.
GROSS MOTOR	Runs around obstacles
	Walks on a line
	Balances on one foot for 5 to 10 seconds
	Pushes, pulls, steers wheeled toys
	Rides tricycle by steering and pedaling
	Uses slide without assistance
	Jumps over 15 cm (6") high object, landing on both feet together
	Throws ball overhead
	Catches ball bounced to him or her
FINE MOTOR	Builds tower of nine small blocks
	Drives nails and pegs
	Copies circle
	Imitates cross
	Manipulates clay or playdough materials
	Experiments with using scissors
	Uses brush to paint at easel
	Likes to work simple puzzles
	Assembles bristle block, snap-block structures
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	
Receptive Language	Begins to understand sentences involving time concepts (for example, We are visiting the fire station tomorrow.)
	Understands size comparatives such as big and bigger
	Understands relationships expressed by "if . . . then" or "because" sentences
	Carries out a series of two to four related directions
	Understands when told, Let's pretend
Expressive Language	Talks in sentences of three or more words which take the form noun-action-object (I see the cat) or noun-action-location (Daddy sit on chair)
	Tells about past experiences
	Uses "s" on nouns to indicate plural
	Uses "ed" on verbs to indicate past time (may over-generalize)
	Refers to self using pronouns I or me
	Repeats at least one nursery rhyme (T.V. jingle) and can sing a song
	Speech is understandable to strangers, but there are still some sound errors
COGNITIVE SKILLS	Recognizes and matches six colors, visually
	Intentionally stacks blocks or rings in order of size
	Draws somewhat recognizable picture that is meaningful to child, if not to adult. (Process, not product)
	Names and briefly explains picture (Tell me about your picture)
	Asks questions for information (why and how questions requiring simple answers)
	Knows own age
	Knows own last name
	Has short attention span
	Learns through observing and imitating adults, and by adult's verbal explanations/conversations
	Has increased understanding of concepts: classification or grouping, functions or processes, part/whole relationships, identify pictures of hand and foot as parts of body)
	Begins to be aware of past and present. Uses time vocabulary: yesterday, tomorrow, and today
SELF-HELP SKILLS	Pours well from small pitcher
	Spreads soft butter or cream cheese with knife
	Buttons and unbuttons large buttons
	Washes hands unassisted
	Blows nose when reminded
SOCIAL SKILLS	Joins in play with other children; begins to interact
	Shares toys. Takes turns with assistance. Requires guidance in learning how to mediate situations
	Begins dramatic play, recreating events, situations, etc.
	Identifies self and others
	Associates concrete behaviors with jobs or roles people perform
	Uses kinship terms as labels for categories of people, e.g., boys as brothers, women as mothers, etc
	Uses "friend" to reference playmates or others liked at present

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DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS*
of
FOUR YEAR OLD CHILDREN

DEVELOPMENTAL AREAS	CHARACTERISTICS OR MILESTONES
PHYSICAL	Nutrition and growth patterns: Most fours have slow rates of growth and small appetites: they have high energy level
GROSS MOTOR	Walks backward toe-heel
	Jumps forward 10 times without falling
	Gallops inefficiently
	Skips with one-footed cycle
	Walks up and down stairs alone, alternating feet
	Turns somersault
	Throws ball overhand
	Catches ball bounced to him or her
FINE MOTOR	Cuts on line continuously
	Copies circle, cross, laboriously reproduces squares and may attempt triangles
	Prints few upper case letters
	Graphic forms appear in combination of two or more. Guide pictures appear (house, human form, sun)
	Folds and creases paper horizontally, vertically, and diagonally as demonstrated by an adult
	Fingerpaints with broad movements of fingers, hands, and arms
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	
Receptive Language	Follows three unrelated commands in proper order
	Understands comparatives like pretty, prettier, and prettiest
	Listens to long stories but often misinterprets the facts
	Incorporates verbal directions into play activities
	Understands sequencing of events when told
Expressive Language	Asks when, how, and why questions
	Uses models like can, will, shall, should, and might
	Joins sentences together (I like hamburger and I like fries.)
	Talks about causality by using because and so
	Tells the content of a story but may confuse the facts
	Much interest in nonsense language and shyness
	Likes big words and new vocabulary
COGNITIVE SKILLS	Plays with words, creates own rhyming words; says or makes up words having similar sounds
	Points to and names four to six colors
	Matches pictures of familiar objects (for example, shoe, sock, foot, apple, orange, banana)
	Draws a person with two to six recognizable parts, such as head, arms, legs. Can name or match drawn parts to own body
	Draws, names, and describes recognizable picture
	Rote counts from 1-10, imitating adults
	Has more extended attention span. Learns through observing and listening to adults as well as through exploration. Is easily distracted
	Has increased understanding of concepts of function, time, part/whole relationships. Function or use of objects may be stated in addition to names of objects
	Time concepts are expanding. The child can talk about yesterday or last week
SELF-HELP SKILLS	Pours well from small pitcher
	Cuts easy foods with table knife
	Buttons, zips, snaps
	Dresses and undresses self
	Laces shoes, but cannot tie bows
	Exhibits independent toilet skills
	Washes and dries hands
	Blows nose when reminded
	Feeds self
SOCIAL SKILLS	Plays and interacts with others
	Dramatic play is closer to reality, with attention paid to detail, time, and space
	Shows interest in exploring sex differences

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DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS*
of
FIVE YEAR OLD CHILDREN

DEVELOPMENTAL AREAS	CHARACTERISTICS OR MILESTONES
PHYSICAL	Appetite improves, food selection patterns and eating habits defined
	Physical activity seems to be in balance
GROSS MOTOR	Runs with ease; can run lightly on toes
	Hops easily as much as six feet on each foot
	Touches toes
	Skips on alternate feet
	Jumps a dowel held ten inches from the ground
	Walks forward on balance beam; may begin reversal on beam
	Runs and kicks moving ball
	Begins pumping swing and working on the monkey bars
	Catches large ball in two hands when thrown underhand; uses hands more than arms in catching a ball
	Throws ball overhead
FINE MOTOR	Shows definite hand preference (Individual differences observable)
	Draws a six or seven part person
	Prints first and last or some of letters in last name
	Learns to tie bows or shoe laces
	Cuts simple shapes (square, triangle, circle)
	Prints numerals; copies 1-5
	Completes an eight piece puzzle
	Copies circle, square, triangle, cross, V, and H
	Traces diamond
	Begins to color within lines
	Refinent of pencil grasp
	Pastes and glues appropriately
	Uses scissors in open and close motion; cuts in snips and can follow heavy line (ego-building)
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	
Receptive Language	Can take turns in conversation
	Gives and receives information
	Communicates well with family, friends, and new people
Expressive Language	Working on such things as subject-verb agreement and some irregular past tense verbs
	Enjoys dictation, seeing words in print
	Interest in sound-letter correspondence
	Aware of beginning consonant sounds
COGNITIVE SKILLS	Retells story from picture book with reasonable accuracy
	Names some letters and numerals
	Rote counts to 10 (individual)
	Sorts objects by single characteristics (for example, by color, shape, or size if the difference is obvious)
	Is beginning to use time more accurately, concepts of tomorrow and yesterday
	Begins to relate clocktime to daily schedule
	Attention span increases noticeably
	More attentive to guidance and instruction
	Learns that actions have both causes and effects
	Still working on distinguishing fantasy and reality
SELF-HELP SKILLS	Dresses self completely
	Ties bow
	Brushes teeth independently
SOCIAL SKILLS	Chooses own friends
	Plays simple table games
	Engages with other children in cooperative play involving group decisions, role assignments, fair play
	Pretend rebellion
	Flashes of humor—"knock, knock jokes
	Delights in pranks or "fooling" people

Source

* Note. Excerpted from Mainstreaming Preschoolers with Health Impairments by A. Healy, P. McAvearey, C.S. Von Hippel, and S. H. Jones. 1978, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Human Development Services, Administration for Children Youth and Families, Head Start Bureau.

Individual Differences

Children are like snowflakes.
At first they appear to be alike,
But on close examination they are all different.
Focus on their similarities,
But understand their differences

(Berger, 1991, p. 112).

General Differences

Each child within your classroom is a unique individual with genetic and environmental forces guiding his or her development. Each child possesses an individual temperament that characterizes mood, adaptability, sensitivity, and intensity of reactions. In addition, each child's temperament affects persistence and attention span. Each child responds to the environment in a way that is characteristic of individual disposition (Chess & Thomas, 1987).

Each child exhibits a learning style that is typical of his or her approach to situations and interactions with people. A child may be observant and reflective or a child may be quick to participate, forfeiting time to survey the activity or situation. Each child demonstrates variations that are individual to his or her growth and development.

Environmental Effects

Individual differences exhibited by a child may be indicative of the environment in which he or she lives. A child is vulnerable to early experiences and to environmental conditions that impose a threat to developmental, physical, or psychological well-being (child abuse and neglect, dysfunctional family, stress, alcoholism and other forms of drug abuse, divorce, death, chronic illness). Likewise, the special needs of a child in these predicaments require keen observation, specific documentation of physical and behavioral conditions, appropriate attention to preserve self-esteem through program planning, and acquisition of support services to assist the child and family.

Special Needs

Preschool programs will reflect a wide range of individual differences as most children have special needs in some areas. Within the classroom, children who have special needs related to a disability will be included in all aspects of the program. Children with special needs will be integrated in the daily activities, routines, and group experiences of the whole preschool program.

Specific areas of need may have been identified for some children entering the preschool setting. However, special needs may be observed and noted by the teacher as children participate in the daily program.

As needs are identified, the teacher may request assistance in obtaining a more complete review and assessment of specific needs. The teacher may obtain assistance through the local resource personnel for a referral or for detailed procedures to request the referral.

The teacher plays a critical role in the process of observation necessary to the identification of a special need. Also, the teacher assumes a significant role in coordinating resources with local and community personnel. Teachers need to work closely with parents, resource personnel, and school administrators to plan a quality program for all participants.

Common areas in which support services or curricula modifications may be requested include: Speech or language delays and disorders; hearing impairments, including children with chronic ear infections and congestion problems regularly affecting how well they hear; visual impairments and the child's ability to make visual discriminations; health impairments which affect the child's ability to participate fully in the program; physical disabilities which require adaptations or special techniques; and developmental delays of all types which result in significant delays in motor, communication, cognition, self-help or adaptive behaviors.

Whenever such needs are identified, a team will review and plan for the child. The team will always include the parent and the teacher. Additional support persons may be needed to assist in developing an IEP (Individual Education Program) for the child. Support persons who may become a part of the team include a speech and language pathologist, a person trained in special education, a physical therapist, and staff of agencies which may have assisted the child previously or may be currently serving the child.

The team will develop an IEP to define special accommodations or skills to assist the child in the classroom. In addition, the team will identify within the IEP any additional support services required for the child with special needs.

Teacher Responsibilities

Numerous individual differences prevail in any teaching situation. However, the teacher's responsibilities to each child include:

- Development of trusting relationship.
- Demonstration of care and genuine concern for individual welfare.
- Enhancement of self-esteem.
- Creation of friendly, accepting environment.
- Provision of materials and experiences suitable to child's developmental level and cultural background.
- Validation of parents as child's primary teacher.

Providing space for active indoor physical play is essential, particularly in districts where outdoor play is limited.

The Role Of Play

A typical comment that most teachers of young children hear at some point during their career—"Jessica said that she just plays at school. Do you teach anything in your program, Ms. Cunningham?"

Although the value and the intent of play are often misunderstood, play remains the vital mechanism for learning and for the integration of skills during the early years. Play affords the child valuable opportunities:

- To explore the environment.
- To discover how things are made and work.
- To experiment with language, ideas, and materials.
- To re-create jobs and roles of significant individuals.
- To re-invent novel situations.
- To distinguish real from unreal.
- To express feelings and develop acceptable outlets for feelings.
- To clarify information for individual ownership.
- To practice motor skills.
- To develop social competencies.
- To integrate cultural values and activities.
- To manipulate concrete materials in order to form mental images.
- To engage in creative expression through art, music and movement, language, problem-solving and construction.
- To facilitate concentration, engagement.
- To experience competence by active participation and decision making (Anselmo, 1987; Cherry, 1976; Hendrick, 1990, Frost & Klein, 1979).

Play is the process through which the social, emotional, physical, cognitive and creative aspects of development are meshed within the whole child.

The Influences Of Family, Culture, Community

As family structures change, cultural diversity becomes more prevalent and community organizations provide more support services to children and families, teachers are prompted to view the developing child in a system of greater environmental impact.

Addressing the change in family structures, Pauline Boss (1988) redefines the family as a "continuing system of interacting personalities bound together by shared rituals and rules even more than by biology" (p. 12). Today many variations in family structure exist: dual-career, single parent, teenage parent, blended, homeless and migrant families. These variations in life styles and family structures affect the quality of environment, relationships, and basic needs available to the child. They determine the social adjustment and emotional resiliency of the child in the home, school, or community.

The classroom of teachers and children is not an isolated environment. It is a significant part connected to a whole system. Urie Brofenbrenner (1979) defines an ecological model of systems that demonstrate the interrelationship of family, neighborhood, community and culture. He examines the interrelationship of family and friends, social institutions and community agencies. Brofenbrenner explains how the interrelationship of environments affects the growth and development of the young child in a dramatic way.

Brofenbrenner's model accentuates the need to collaborate as diverse backgrounds, family structures, and lifestyles continue to

Small muscles in the hands develop later than the large muscles in arms and legs.

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affect the environment in which children develop. Developing cooperative relationships with helping agencies is an important facet of providing services to young children and families. Coleman (1991) states that "consultation with family professionals outside the field of education can help to ensure that, within the family and school environments, a consistent and complementary relationship is maintained between children's early growth and developmental experiences" (p. 17).

Importantly, teachers need to consider cultural differences that exist within family neighborhood and community environments. A Soviet psychologist, Vygotsky, emphasizes the significance associated with the transmission of cultural values and practices by family members (Berk, 1991). He reveals how family members through modeling and conversation transmit cultural values, games, traditional skills, and other elements of customary practice related to a specific ethnic group. Therefore, the teacher gleans additional information and acquires resources from each family in order to transmit cultural values and traditions within the school setting.

As teachers understand the impact of the family and its status at any given time, they see the urgency to expand their concept of the environment in which the child participates. They observe the necessity to incorporate that information as a part of the child's experience in the classroom. Also, they recognize the goals of individual families and utilize their experiences to affirm the child's heritage.

> "We know that children feel respected when their families are respected—which means reaching across diverse cultural, lifestyle, and economic differences, using all of our resources outside the classroom to create linkages between family and school environments" (Coleman, 1990, p. 20).

Shucking corn is an example of an activity that requires the use of small muscles and develops a child's fine motor skill and eye-hand coordination.

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Only when a child has developed self-acceptance is it possible to accept other children.

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